Chapter Summaries

On Privacy

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June 2011

The Introduction shows that privacy can be conceptualised in terms of seclusion and solitude, anonymity and confidentiality, intimacy and domesticity, so that it is unnecessary to agree on a definition of privacy in order to analyse it philosophically. It shows that democratic theory and practice provide a set of working assumptions about what is valuable and right, equal and unequal, free and unfree which enable us to distinguish privacy from other values, and to resolve those disagreements about its nature and value which are, in fact, resolvable by some combination of theory and practice.

Ch.1 examines the reasons why thoughtful and well-meaning people disagree about the nature and value of privacy. It shows that both instrumental and non-instrumental claims about the value of privacy face familiar difficulties, which often have less to do with privacy itself, than with the difficulty of substantiating causal claims, on the one hand, and beliefs about value on the other. However, a look at the importance of the secret ballot shows that privacy can be valuable, because critical to people's freedom and equality, although it prevents us from punishing all selfish, thoughtless and coercive behaviour.

Ch. 2 looks at the ethics of 'outing' – or the publication without consent of true personal information. It shows that privacy protections for confidentiality, anonymity and seclusion can enhance, rather than undermine, freedom of expression. It distinguishes democratic from consequentialist and Kantian objections to outing and uses the experience of Oliver Sipple to illustrate these differences. Finally, it distinguishes freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and uses the controversy over the publication of 'kiss and tell' stories to illuminate the importance of privacy both to individual freedom and to democratic government.

Ch. 3 looks at the implications of privacy for sex, reproduction and the family. It shows that our claims to privacy do not stop at the door of our house, but shape our rights as employers and employees, soldiers and civilians, parents and children. It explains why the right to live with, and to look after, those we love is central to democratic politics. Hence special tests of wisdom, virtue, wealth or connections are as inimical to a democratic conception of privacy as they are to a democratic conception of politics.

Ch. 4 looks at Judith Thomson's claim that privacy rights are just property rights in disguise. It shows that claims to privacy cannot always be reduced to claims over property, illustrating the argument with the contrasting claims to privacy and property of Joyce Maynard and John Salinger, once their relationship had ended. It shows that collective forms of property can be necessary to privacy, and uses recent work on poverty and homelessness to illustrate its claims. Finally, it explains why people's claims to privacy can justify forms of private ownership without threatening socio-economic equality and democratic government.

The Conclusion explains that privacy is valuable, if we care about democracy, because it helps to protect people from unjustified scorn, humiliation and recrimination. However, there is nothing intrinsic to privacy which means that it must support, rather than undermine, people's freedom, equality and happiness. Rather, the value of privacy depends, in part, on what we believe and do. If privacy is to be a democratic value, then, we must describe it in ways that reflect people's claims to equality and self-government, and must act so that privacy is valuable for everyone, and not just for a favoured or fortunate few.